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Advancing professionalism among employees of the U.S. Department of Agriculture

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THE STATE OF PROFESSIONALISM IN USDA

Part I. Perceptions and Attitudes
by George B. Rogers

The beliefs and biases we all carry stem largely from our background. This article reflects many years of Government service, much of it in USDA; four recent years' experience as a private consultant, with continued contacts with USDA and as a user of agricultural economics and other output; an earlier farm and physical sciences background; and, some time in academia and industry.

The above perspective leads to the following conclusion, that the state of professionalism in USDA has irregularly declined over a long period of years. Today, USDA still has a substantial number of competent, qualified, and dedicated professionals. But this group may find it increasingly difficult to achieve their potential or match past performance levels. It is all to their credit that they keep trying in the face of so much adversity.

The reasons which produced a decline in the state of professionalism are numerous. They are both external and internal. They include historical, structural, administrative, and political causes. One cannot object to change equated with progress. But change for change's sake (or whoever is in charge) has too often been the rule rather than the exception. Common sense suggests changes be made carefully, using experience and deliberation, and not in haste, conceit, or under pressure. And, one could hope that some sense of fair play might prevail within and without. This also is too often forgotten.

One cannot overestimate the importance of how people come to regard public employees. These impressions are formed by contacts, happenings, and allegation.

(continued on page 6)

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT CONTRACTING

by G. K. Hartmann, Member
Federal Interprofessional Forum

One of the most important functions of government is to assure that Federal money expended in the private sector is spent wisely and efficiently. This requires an intelligent and honest civil service to specify what is to be done, and to evaluate and accept the products of the contracted work. Government expenditures for goods and services including Defense and Space contracting are many times greater than the in-house costs of Government operation.

Government outside expenditures fall mainly into three categories, each covered in detail by an OMB circular which establishes policy and in many cases prescribes operational details. The three main categories are: 1) Systems acquisition, 2) Contracting out of "commercial activities," and 3) Consulting. These three categories represent actual or potential government expenditures of approximately \$150 billion, \$15 billion, and \$1.5 billion respectively. With the growth of the Federal budget and the relative stability of inhouse government costs, it is apparent that contracting has increased in recent years. I believe that all civil servants have a stake in developing a high level of competence in the administration of contracting activities in order that true economics in both the immediate present and in the future can be realized.

First, the category of "system acquisition" applies in many cases to the acquisition of things which are not on the market and which will exist in the future only as the result of research and development. The policies laid out in OMB Circular A-109 on the subject reduces the

role of government laboratories vis-a-vis contractors and work to make the government a less sophisticated buyer. The basic point is missed that research and development toward new products must be intelligently managed and cannot be written up as fixed price contracts until the new items are fully described and tested. At that point, production can begin without detailed government supervision, except of course for emergencies.

Second, OMB's circular A-76 on contracting out of so-called commercial activities appears to rely in large part on immediate, up front cost reduction as the criterion for shifting work to contractors. It is too early to assess the dollar cost incurred as a result of loss of flexibility, for example. This kind of loss could result because highly trained, high-level managers could spend otherwise productive hours in solving the problems that arise due to unanticipated changes and emergencies, and in attempting to solve communication problems. Losses due to increases in morale problems and to loss of institutional memory are difficult to quantify, but can be of some concern to at least second and third line supervisors who may, in fact, be able, eventually to document measurable losses.

If a central authority such as OMB, suggests "universal" solutions to local agencies' problems, most long-term observers of the Federal scene might predict that there could be differences in perception of both the problems and their solutions, depending upon whether actors are at the central or agency level.

Third, with regard to contracting for consulting services (A-120), there is a danger well recognized by the General Accounting Office--namely that obtaining consultant advice is acceptable providing such advice does not supersede the government's responsibility to make its own judgements and decisions. If in-house competence is low, and if the top ranks are politicized, there will be increasing reliance on personal services of consultant contracts for informed (and/or biased) opinions. It is my hope that high technical competence will be maintained in-house so that judgements which are cost effective over the long term can be made and the quality of our government markedly improved.

A fourth point to be emphasized is that the availability of up-to-date and accurate information concerning the numbers and costs of

contracts of the various kinds on a government wide basis should be improved. This would allow monitoring of trends in expenditures and objectives with more emphasis available for remedies and less debate as to what the facts are. Such an annual book should be within the province of the GAO, if requested by Congress. And this, after all is a large part of what the government is for--to obtain the best use of public funds in the public interest.

The maintenance of a competent, efficient and motivated career Civil Service dedicated to the proper conduct of the business of the government can be the goal of all those who work in the Federal public sector. Surely, such a goal would be furthered by examining and reexamining potential changes referred to in this paper to determine short-and long-term effects on the performance of our Federal civil servants.

PROFESSIONALISM

by Norman Berg, retired Chief
Soil Conservation Service

Upon retirement, having experienced four decades of career public service, mostly in USDA, many co-workers wrote sharing their feelings with me in the spring of 1982. Their varied expressions of friendship and best wishes for the future brought back fond memories of shared tasks and challenges faced together. One letter, as an example, was most gratifying because the author represented a generation that would help lead my former agency into the next century. This letter from a State Conservationist said:

"I want to personally express my appreciation for the leadership you have provided the Soil Conservation Service as our Chief. Your knowledge of soil and water conservation has led us to great achievements and has earned you and your agency international recognition. Your enthusiasm is catching and your standard for professionalism has served as a model for us all.

"As you know, I will work just as hard and be just as dedicated to our mission under new leadership--but without you it won't be the same. For me no one can replace Norm Berg. You personally contributed to my professional development by your guidance, listening, and caring. Best wishes to you in your continued successful leadership of soil and water conservation."

As a professional conservationist, I considered myself most fortunate to have had supervisors at every level of my work who recognized the importance of the individual. There is no harm in thinking of yourself as the center of the universe so long as we remember that there are as many other centers as there are men, women, and children. Therefore, the liberty of the individual to control his or her own conduct is one of the most precious possessions we enjoy. A deep-rooted respect for the individual is an essential part of the democratic system including those who serve in government. However, too often this Nation has labeled its civil servant "bureaucrat" and the system served "bureaucracy" and thereby created in many persons' minds a new variety of sin. The good that is in the system should not suffer by the faults of some of those who administer it. Irresponsible attacks upon its public service is a luxury that no democracy can long afford. Thoughtless criticism is one of those serious occupational hazards faced by those who serve the public. Admittedly, the civil service hurts itself most when it becomes ingrown, when it becomes its own advisor, actor, approver, and justifier. Some even seal themselves off from the outside world to brood in their own cloisters, amid loyalties and group agreements shielded from the realities of the public they were created to serve. Government hurts itself, too, when it claims that its people are a special sort of first among equals. Therefore, as professionals, from whatever discipline we come or agency we serve, we need to link ourselves to purposes which really attract us and are consistent with our abilities and our rules of conduct. This requires that we pick the right thing in life as our measure of success, then all else will be relative, plus or minus, positive or negative.

We have been fortunate in Agriculture to recognize that an idea is like a seed. It should not be discarded merely because it is small. It needs to be planted, cultivated and harvested. No matter what our purpose may be--it starts as a small idea and a small action. We must do many little things to accomplish just one big thing. A "drop in the bucket" is not unimportant. It may be of great importance in the result it produces. The raindrop and soil loss makes the point in my profession.

It has been my privilege to serve every President since Franklin D. Roosevelt and every Secretary of Agriculture since Claude Wickard. Each person sought in his own way those op-

portunities to fully exercise his capacities. They each impressed me as being in full agreement with William James, the philosopher, who said, "the great use of a life is to spend it for something that will outlast it."

Today's overlapping generations face a central dilemma of how to keep informed amidst the dizzying succession of discoveries and events. It is impossible to turn back the clock. Change is imperative--as we move toward unknown horizons. The scientist knows that the great art of research lies less in solving problems than in discovering problems to be solved.

I knew the strengths and weaknesses of my organization. I shared the work. I delegated freely the responsibility and the authority to perform assigned functions. I cooperated with others who had duties for their organizations. Above all, because of my early exposure to Dr. Ralph Nichols, while at the University of Minnesota, who later wrote "The Art of Listening," I regarded listening as an activity. It is central to getting things done. It strongly influences morale.

As Chief of the Soil Conservation Service, I asked on the first day in that position for everyone's ideas to help improve our public service and carry out our assignments. Later on, I sought all employees' assistance to increase our mutual ability to

- solve problems
- establish priorities
- deal with controversial issues--not avoid them
- trust and support the decisions of supervisors
- be innovative, and
- listen to your concerns.

Finally, on my last day as agency head, I said to all employees, "On April 5, 1982, you will have a new Chief. Help him to do the best job ever. You did that for me!"

I took oaths of office as a civil servant and as a U. S. Marine in the early 1940s. I took them very seriously. As a professional you should reread your commitment, just as a reminder of how privileged we are to serve our Nation's government.

REFORM 88--PROGRESS ON NO. 9

by

Terry B. Kinney, Jr., Administrator, ARS

As part of the White House Reform 88 initiative, the Department has begun an effort to enhance productivity through improved morale, well-being, work environment, training, and a sense of commitment of USDA public employees. Since the success of other USDA management reforms will depend on the skills, health, attitude, and motivation of our supervisors and employees, there is a need to give increased "executive attention" to the human element of the management process.

Through this effort, many complex and sometimes conflicting issues arise. For example:

- Employees are constantly being asked to provide additional services, work in less space, and keep up with changes in programs and technology. At the same time, Federal employees are being subjected to criticism aimed at the Federal government in general and the Federal employee in particular. Such criticism carries with it a perceived threat that career employees are going to be impacted negatively. This situation is causing stress and uncertainty among employees.
- Managers and supervisors are being asked to manage their programs more efficiently, make difficult personnel management decisions, rely less on traditional administrative support services, and, at the same time, operate their program with less resources.

Responding to the challenges created by these issues is requiring "Department Officials" to think more creatively about employee productivity and morale. It is becoming evident that the Department will need to invest resources in those programs and activities which provide benefits to the health and welfare of employees. Without a long-range plan for training and human resource development, employees may be unprepared to take advantage of the opportunities which will result in the expanded use of technology and office automation and, in turn, assure continued delivery of the Department's services to the public.

Emphasis must also focus on programs that reduce stress and uncertainty at the workplace and enhance the fitness and health of employees. Without such an emphasis, the Department is likely to experience an increased rate of disabilities, early retirements, occupational illnesses/injuries, and personal health problems among its employees.

The Reform No. 9 Steering Committee, which I chair, was established by the Secretary to assist him in dealing with the issues surrounding the employee element of the management process. Membership is comprised of agency heads and management officials, and our role is to define strategies for stimulating management support for programs and activities which have a positive influence on the morale, well-being, work environment, and overall preparedness of the USDA workforce, and discouraging management practices which have a negative influence on employee productivity and morale.

Our Committee has established work groups to study several major areas of opportunity for improving employee productivity and morale. The groups have evaluated industry's management practices, research results, literature accounts, internal USDA data bases, and individual member recommendations. The groups found that there are many instant answers in the latest off-the-shelf management manuals and journals. However, we concluded that a majority of these answers are aimed more toward private sector workforce where there is direct control over what work is undertaken and how they will undertake it.

Public administration is a world apart from the private sector where little else counts outside the ever-present bottom line. Because we are entrusted with public funds, government operations are constantly being subjected to public scrutiny and Congressional oversight. As a result, our worklife seems to be a series of rules, regulations, policies, and procedures that dictate how things must be done. It doesn't appear that we have the flexibility to try new and creative approaches to the human element of the management process.

Quality of Worklife Surveys

Rather than assume that Washington-based, top managers have all the answers, particularly when 90 percent of our workforce is in field locations, the Reform No. 9 Steering Committee reached out to a sample of employees to "talk" with them about the issues of productivity and morale. Going to 10 USDA population centers (two sessions were held in Washington, D.C.), we randomly selected 1,004 employees to assist us in developing ideas and suggestions for improving the quality of worklife for USDA employees. This effort was designed to make employees "a-part-of" rather than "apart-from" these important management decisions.

The participants in the 11 sessions were asked to provide input on a set of statements concerning a wide range of job-related issues that impact employee productivity and morale. After they responded to the statements, the answers were tabulated and shared with the participants.

Then subgroups were formed, and the participants were asked to provide feedback for improving those areas which appear to need management attention. Each subgroup shared its ideas with the other subgroups, and a consolidated set of ideas and suggestions was prepared. An Interim Report was distributed to the Steering Committee on August 17, 1984, and to the 1,004 participants on August 29, 1984.

Employee Work Group

One employee from each of the 11 Quality of Worklife Survey sessions came to Washington, D.C., during the week of September 10-14, 1984, to assist management officials in reviewing the results of the 11 Quality of Worklife Survey sessions. The Work Group will be asked to develop strategies for translating the employee recommendations into action. The Steering Committee then needs to determine which administrative management practices have the greatest impact on employee productivity and morale. Then the group will help the Steering Committee design programs and policies which can be recommended to the Secretary.

Expected Outcomes

Management officials and employees will have a data base and ideas to properly identify:

1. Employee motivation and willingness factors so that jobs and tasks can be performed more efficiently. This includes:
 - designing and maintaining work environments which respond to the emotional and physical limitations of workers;
 - discovering and properly recognizing employee talents and contributions at all levels of the organization;
 - improving communications and cooperation between supervisors and employees at the individual worksite; and
 - increasing employee participation in the decision-making process.
2. The most efficient way to update technical and administrative skills of the workforce and promote the physical/mental fitness of employees. This includes:
 - increasing executive and managerial awareness and skills for identifying and satisfying employee needs in the work environment;
 - providing training and educational opportunities for employees to promote their individual growth and development, especially in the areas of changing technology and office automation; and
 - designing and promoting use of employee fitness and wellness programs and conducting stress reduction seminars for all employees.
3. The administrative programs that can be streamlined and made more responsive to management and employee needs. This includes:
 - eliminating unnecessary paperwork and administrative clearances;

- focusing on those activities which respond to the needs of individual units so that management stimulates team cooperation and work spirit; and
- delegating those authorities to field staffs that will stimulate timely administrative and program decisions.

Conclusion

Productivity in this Department is vital to everyone of us--as an employee, a taxpayer, and a concerned citizen. There are plenty of opportunities to improve productivity and morale in every unit, but someone must take the initiative. The effort to improve productivity and morale did not begin with this project, nor should it end here. None of the recommendations and suggestions developed by our employees will affect productivity and morale until our managers, supervisors and employees put them into action.

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(continued from page 1, column 1)

The public's perception of Government may be shaped by limited contacts or hearsay. What any agency does reflects to some extent on all. The following sample items, unfortunately, are remembered more when Federal or State agencies are involved than with private industry. For example, failure to respond to communications or long delays, telephone run-arounds, bored or unpleasant answers, preoccupation with private affairs, lack of knowledge about past or current work, etc. Some managers in Agriculture and elsewhere have had some success in dealing with these; others still have unsolved problems. We'll have more to say later on what external things shape public perception.

Quality and amount of output are important. Consider also what happened to some economic agencies of USDA under the guise of internal reorganization. Threatened with down-grading or banishment to obscure posts, many professionals with good records were harassed into retiring or shifting to outside employment. A record of service to the public and industry was unpopular and charges of "captive" abounded. Research became more top-level planned and directed, and responsiveness to political appointees over-emphasized. All this did much to set back these agencies and professionalism; the damage either will take years to repair, or the former level of performance may never return. Under the banner of "getting rid of the deadwood," excesses overran. 1/ Predictably, output fell.

Being a dedicated professional in Agriculture requires some adaptations. Special rules exist, the number of co-workers is large and diverse, and unique opportunities exist for specialization. A desire for public service is a necessary attitude. The monetary rewards are potentially satisfactory, but not so spectacular as may be alleged outside. Hence, non-monetary rewards can be important to the professional (and non-professional), and this should be so to a considerable degree. Administrations and Congresses should recognize these special conditions and the efforts good employees expend. 2/

The perceptions of Government workers and agencies are too often created and exaggerated by those with insufficient insight or biased missions. Hence, the state of professionalism in USDA has suffered over time and in recent years from an overdose of political bad-mouthing. The public image created by this is not justified; but it is so easily and widely believed that appropriations can be unduly slashed and Civil Service benefits undermined. Successful professionalism requires good morale. Many professionals are self-starters and continue to carry on the best they can. But morale has suffered, though not fatally, and constructive talk and action are needed to rebuild it.

1/ Some perpetrators of the "purge" emerged outside in places of esteem; others or their co-conspirators survive within in higher posts. So much for the visible rewards for team-playing (even if wrong) over professional objectivity and integrity.

2/ Politicians have made big yardage from things like: "cut Government spending"; "control the bureaucracy"; "Government should perform only those things that are necessary" (as that individual sees it no doubt); "clean up the mess in Washington." We hear all too little about positive things.

The winning of an election carries with it the right to make appointments. If such appointments do not over-emphasize policy compatibility or rewarding party faithful at the expense of good qualifications, a constructive example can be set for the career system. The career system, in turn, must not overstock line posts with conformers or "buddies." Qualifications should clearly come first. One can work with many different individuals where "give and take" is allowed and elevation by dubious tactics discouraged. 3/ Career people must not lose sight of public service for personal gain, or trying to protect (perpetuate?) the agency or overly please its present masters.

Congress and any Administration can do more to "clean up its act" by applying a uniform code of ethics to elected, appointed, and career people. It is hard to equate a \$10 lunch or gift (or no "freebees" at all) with outside income from speeches, tricky salary increases, PACs, perks, large gifts, campaign fund raisers, etc. It is preposterous to allege that career employees can be so cheaply bought, whereas others are "worth" more before being influenced. Non-career people could set a tight-standards, lower-cost example for career people.

What we urgently need to elevate the reduced level of professionalism in USDA and other agencies is a change from campaign rhetoric, unimaginative management, and internal paranoia. We need to more consistently recognize technical competence and quality output and reward it accordingly. 4/ We need to see those who profess to believe in the solid values of the past and individual opportunity and integrity to apply such values inside Government.

Everyone should desire to see Government run more efficiently. Generalities, lacking substance or internal participation, and whether of political or business origin, are not enough. 5/ Ideas for improvement could and should come more heavily from within. USDA's professionals, honestly encouraged and treated with dignity, could help immensely. 6/
(PART II OF THIS ARTICLE WILL BE IN OUR NEXT JOURNAL)

3/ And yes, there should be room for camaraderie, humor, and humility. These are important to the building of real esprit de corps.

4/ It is not an easy road for supervisors and administrators to rebuild lost skills and agency status; operate restricted programs that cannot serve broad public needs; go through unnecessary and undesirable evaluation procedures; bridge the "generation gap;" serve public masters and the public at the same time, etc.

5/ The Grace Commission report may be full of "sound business practices" or be campaign fodder for candidates for (re)election, but some ideas seem too fuzzy or far-fetched to fit internal experience. And, what happens to "encourage the whistleblower" rhetoric when it is your ox that is being gored?

6/ At a time when U.S. industry is (re?)discovering the value of more employee participation in management (Japan?), where's the parallel effort in Government? Structured surveys (with retaliation feared), political slander, internal inequities and power plays, etc., show how far we are from turning this corner!

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MESSAGE FROM OPEDA PRESIDENT THOMPSON

This issue of The Journal of OPEDA is composed of several thought-provoking, by-lined articles that touch on matters of great concern to many professionals of various disciplines in USDA.

We commend them to you for your edification with the understanding that the opinions expressed are those of the authors which do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of OPEDA.

The Journal was conceived as another medium for professional expression by OPEDA members, but contributions from non-OPEDA members are welcomed. For your guidance you will find on page 8 of this issue a statement of our editorial policy. We hope you will read it and be encouraged to send us your thoughts on matters of concern.

EDITORIAL POLICY

The Journal of OPEDA is a professional journal dedicated to advancing professionalism and achieving the other objectives of OPEDA. The "Journal's" purposes are:

1. Advance its reader's knowledge of how to increase the effectiveness in the performance of his or her duties,
2. Promote the efficient and effective operation of agencies of the Department of Agriculture to better serve the public, and,
3. Promote media for professionals to test ideas on policy and management decisions that affect the employees and communities they serve.

To accomplish this, "The Journal" will seek to: a. Stimulate creative thinking, b. Study and evaluate new ideas, c. Organize and summarize information on relevant topics, and d. Discuss and debate the professional aspects of programs, policies, and employment that have an effect on performance and productivity.

Suggestions to Authors

1. What makes an article acceptable to the editors? We are looking for two qualities: professional significance and readability. There is no one way to achieve these goals. However, we believe that to be significant, an article must be in some way useable to the reader: to stimulate thinking, to enlarge knowledge, to improve performance or to be factual, logical, and well focused. To be readable, it should use jargon sparingly. Never use more words than necessary to tell your story. A special dividend would be if it were presented with some wit and erudition. Pedantic dissertation or textbook styles are to be avoided. Finally, the article should contribute to the purposes of "The Journal" as described in the above editorial policy.
2. What needs to be done to prepare and submit an article? Very simply: type your article, double spaced, and send a copy to the editor. If you want the article returned, please note in your cover letter. Tell us in your cover letter why you believe we should publish the article. Give us sufficient information about yourself for an author-identification paragraph. If you wish, send an inquiry first describing or outlining the article. We can then tell you if such an article will fit into "The Journal."
3. Who makes the publication decisions? The editor. Sometimes, if he or she is undecided, he or she will ask the editorial board for their opinion.
4. What is the ideal length? We like short pieces. Most should be 1,000 words or less. Feature articles can vary, but we consider 2,000 words the ideal length. Book reviews (usually solicited, but welcome unsolicited) are generally 250 to 500 words in length. Letters and other commentary of less than 500 words would also receive consideration.
5. What editorial style is used? It should be readily understandable to readers. The active voice is preferred to the passive voice; use first person, not third. "The Journal" uses Webster's New International Dictionary as a standard guide to correct usage. In matter of style, consult any good style manual, such as Univ. of Chicago's "A Manual of Style."
6. What about charts, graphs, photographs? We can use some graphic material to illustrate an article. Photographs will generally be black and white and of professional quality. Charts and graphs may have to be reset to meet our specifications.
7. Do you reprint material from other journals? Ordinarily, no. However, if an article is of a particular interest and deserves wider use, we will consider it. This is about all we can say until we see your article.
8. Do you pay for articles? Sorry, but no. There are annual awards for what the editorial board selects as the best of articles in light of the editorial policy.